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ABSTRACT

To assess the progress of students in large urban school districts and to learn more about major reform initiatives taking place in urban schools, a study of 13 large districts was conducted. Of the 13 districts studied, 10 showed increases in the percentage of elementary school students in the highest poverty schools meeting the district or state proficiency standard in either mathematics or reading. Of these 10, 7 showed a narrowing of the achievement gap between students in the highest poverty and low-poverty schools. Six districts showed increases in the percentage of elementary school students in the highest poverty schools demonstrating improvement in both mathematics and reading, and four showed a narrowing of the achievement gap between high- and low-poverty schools. Districts also showed increases in middle school achievement. Overall, school district administrators claim to be putting in place key accountability policies toward the goals of improving schools and raising achievement. However, administrators admitted that a lack of resources, difficulties in aligning district and state goals and policies, and difficult-to-serve student populations may inhibit success. Administrators from eight of the districts cited recruiting and retaining teachers and providing professional development opportunities as the biggest challenges facing the districts. These urban districts appear to have taken important steps in raising standards and implementing standards-based reforms. (SLD)

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STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT
AND
REFORM TRENDS
IN
13 URBAN DISTRICTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides about $8 billion per year to school systems across the country to improve education for children who attend schools with high concentrations of poverty. Title I's central objective is to support state and local efforts to help all children, especially poor children who are most at risk of failure, reach challenging standards by providing additional resources for schools and students and by encouraging standards-based reforms. A significant proportion of Title I funds is allocated to large urban districts that serve the largest numbers and highest concentrations of low-income children in the country.

Despite widespread public perception, many large urban districts are raising both the quality of their schools and student achievement. To assess the progress of students in these districts and to learn more about the major reform initiatives taking place, the U.S. Department of Education contracted with the McKenzie Group, Inc., to conduct a study of 13 large urban districts. This report summarizes the major findings of the study.

Student Achievement in Urban Districts

To assess student achievement in large urban districts, 13 districts were selected that met four criteria. The selected districts:

- are among the largest school districts in the country in terms of student population;
- have student populations that are at least 35 percent minority and have at least 50 percent of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches;
- are geographically diverse; and
- have at least three years of student achievement data on the same assessment and across the same grades in reading and mathematics for elementary school and middle school students.

The districts studied were:

- Baltimore City Public Schools
- Boston Public Schools
- Chicago Public Schools
- Detroit Public Schools
- Houston Independent School District
- Jefferson County (Ky.), Public Schools
- Kansas City (Kan.) School District[1]
- Memphis City Public Schools
- Miami-Dade County Public Schools
- New York City Public Schools
- Philadelphia School District
- San Antonio Independent School District
- San Francisco Unified School District

Although the disparities from district to district in standards and testing produced some challenges in the analysis of student achievement (see Appendix A for a full discussion of these limitations), it is clear that many of the nation's biggest urban districts, serving large numbers of poor students, are demonstrating marked gains in student achievement. Of the 13 districts studied:

- Ten showed increases in the percentage of elementary students in the highest-poverty schools meeting the district or state proficiency standard in *either* mathematics *or* reading. Of these, seven showed a narrowing of the

[1] Kansas City, Kan., is an exception in that it is not one of the largest districts in the country. The district was selected for this study by the U.S. Department of Education.

achievement gap between students in the highest-poverty and low-poverty schools.

- Six showed increases in the percentage of elementary students attending the highest-poverty schools meeting the district or state proficiency standard in *both* mathematics *and* reading. Of these, four showed a narrowing of the achievement gap between students in the highest-poverty schools and low-poverty schools in both subjects.

Districts are also showing increases in middle-school student achievement. Of the 13 districts studied:

- Ten districts showed increases in the percentage of middle-school students attending the highest-poverty schools meeting the district or state proficiency standard in *either* mathematics *or* reading. Of these, six showed a narrowing of the achievement gap between students in the highest-poverty and low-poverty schools.

- Five districts showed increases in the percentage of middle-school students attending the highest-poverty schools meeting the district or state proficiency standard in *both* mathematics *and* reading. Of these, two showed a narrowing of the achievement gap between students in the highest-poverty schools and low-poverty schools in both subjects.

Chapter I of this report explains how the student achievement data were analyzed. Chapter II provides an analysis of student achievement across the 13 districts, and Chapter III provides a detailed description of the student achievement in each district studied.

Achievement in Context: Districts' Perceptions of their Accountability Systems

In addition to analyzing the student achievement in 13 districts, the McKenzie Group visited eight of the 13 study districts to get a sense of districts' progress in implementing standards-based reforms. During the visit, senior district administrators were asked to reflect on district and state leadership, policies and strategies that could improve school quality and raise student achievement.

Overall, district administrators claim to be putting into place key accountability policies toward the goals of improving schools and raising student achievement. However, administrators admit that a lack of resources, difficulties in aligning district and state goals and policies, and difficult-to-serve student populations may inhibit success. Chapter IV provides examples of district and state policies and strategies that illustrate the major lessons learned from the eight districts visited:

- District administrators believe their districts have high standards for all students.

- Most district administrators believe that their districts' assessments and curricula are aligned with their standards.

- While few districts have put standards fully into place, the majority of district administrators claim to have made significant progress.

- District administrators believe their districts have made great strides in the use of data to improve schools.

- Districts are seeking to include a higher percentage of their students in their assessment systems.

- District administrators' long range plans are linked to district achievement goals and aligned with state plans.

- Districts have made professional development a top priority and are continuously examining ways to improve the quality of instruction.

- Districts are engaging their communities on a variety of education issues, such as rigorous standards, resources for students, and school safety.

- In an effort to regain the public's confidence in public schools, states and districts are designing comprehensive accountability systems to evaluate the performance of schools and instructional staff.

- Districts require adequate funding from the states to implement reforms and meet mandates.

- Districts are making significant efforts to align resources with goals while at the same time ensure equity among schools.

- Title I is both a financial "lifeboat" and a catalyst for systemic reform, providing districts with much needed financial resources and with incentives for developing standards-based accountability systems.

- Districts believe continuity in senior leadership at the state and district levels and the building of collaborative relationships with stakeholders are key to successful school reform.

Conclusion

The districts participating in the study must continue to improve the quality of their schools. According to administrators from eight of the study districts, recruiting, retaining, and providing professional development to teachers stand out as the districts' biggest challenges, especially given the looming nationwide teacher shortage. Student achievement in most of the districts continues to lag, and the gap in achievement between students in the highest poverty and low-poverty schools remains unacceptable. However, these districts, which serve huge numbers of poor and minority students and ever-increasing immigrant populations, including students with limited English proficiency, appear to have taken important steps in raising standards and implementing standards-based reforms. Moreover, these initiatives seem to be helping to raise the achievement of all students and, most encouragingly, having the biggest effect on students in the highest-poverty schools.

TABLE 1: DISTRICTS AND TESTS STUDIED AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN THE HIGHEST-POVERTY SCHOOLS IN READING AND MATHEMATICS

			Reading		Mathematics	
District	Test	Level	Positive Growth Y1-Y3	Gap Narrows Y1-Y3	Positive Growth Y1-Y3	Gap Narrows Y1-Y3
Baltimore City	MSPAP	Elementary	Same	--	No	--
		Middle	Yes	Same	No	--
Boston*	SAT9	Elementary	Same	--	Yes	Yes
		Middle	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chicago	IGAP	Elementary	Same	--	Yes	Yes
		Middle	No	--	Yes	Yes
Detroit	MEAP	Elementary	Same	--	Yes	No
		Middle	No	--	No	--
Houston	TAAS	Elementary	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Middle	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jefferson County, Ky.	KIRIS	Elementary	Yes	No	No	--
		Middle	Yes	No	No	--
Kansas City, Kan.*	MAT	Elementary	No	--	No	--
		Middle	No	--	No	--
Memphis	TCAP	Elementary	No	--	No	--
		Middle	Yes	No	Yes	No
Miami-Dade	SAT8	Elementary	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Middle	Same	--	Yes	No
New York City	PEP	Elementary	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Middle	No	--	Yes	Yes
Philadelphia*	SAT9	Elementary	Yes	No	Yes	No
		Middle	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
San Antonio**	TAAS	Elementary	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Middle	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
San Francisco	CTBS	Elementary	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
		Middle	Same	--	No	--

*Gap narrows column refers to achievement in the highest-poverty schools compared to achievement in low-moderate poverty (35-49%) schools
**Gap narrows column refers to achievement in the highest-poverty schools compared to achievement in high-moderate poverty (50-74%) schools

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